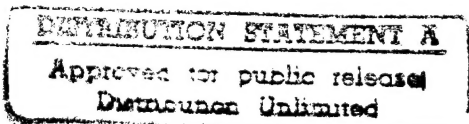


NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
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NATHAN BEDFORD FORREST: A CASE STUDY OF OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP



by

Alan L. Gunn  
United States Department of Energy

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College, the Department of the Navy or the Department of Energy.

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Abstract of

NATHAN BEDFORD FORREST: A CASE STUDY OF OPERATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Lieutenant General Nathan Bedford Forrest, Confederate States of America (C.S.A.), was one of the most effective military commanders on either side of that long and bloody conflict known as the Civil War. His capacity as a war fighter engendered fierce loyalty among his subordinates, distinguished him from his peers, intimidated many of his superiors, and struck fear in the hearts of his opponents. While certain aspects of warfare have changed significantly since the Civil War, the basic aspects of the operational art, in general, and the traits of effective operational leadership, in particular, have remained constant. As a result, the military career of General Forrest still serves as a rich case study of operational leadership. This is especially true when his career is examined in light of modern war fighting doctrine. Such a contrast serves to highlight the continuing relevance of Forrest's operational leadership and provides many valuable insights for current and future operational commanders.

## **Background and Introduction**

Nathan Bedford Forrest was a unique individual in many ways. He was the only soldier on either side to rise from the rank of private to lieutenant general. Of the 25 three and four star confederate generals, only Forrest and two others were not graduates of West Point. While many of his fellow general officers were members of the landed gentry, Forrest was the eldest son of a family of poor "dirt farmers" who struggled to eke out an existence on a leased homestead on recently opened Indian lands in northern Mississippi. He received less than a year of formal education in his entire life as the press of family survival would not allow for such niceties as school. He was left fatherless at age fifteen and with his mother sought to provide for his ten brothers and sisters.<sup>1</sup>

While he was not an educated man, he was a man of great intellect with keen insight. In spite of his humble beginnings, he became an astute businessman engaged in a wide variety of agricultural-related interests which had made him a millionaire prior to the outbreak of the war. His experiences had forced him to make the most of his natural talents and he was by all accounts a very sharp, energetic and determined individual. His leadership abilities were recognized among his fellow citizens and he was twice elected to public office as a councilman in the burgeoning city of Memphis, Tennessee.

As the clouds of war loomed on the horizon, Forrest was not, as were so many of his fellow western Tennesseans, a firebrand calling for the secession of his native state. However, when Tennessee did vote for secession Forrest, along with his son and one of his brothers, answered the call of duty by enlisting and joining a newly formed cavalry company.

He was not, however, your average enlisted recruit. He was 40 years old when he enlisted and, as discussed, he had achieved a certain status in life based on the success of his business and public endeavors. He was uneducated, somewhat rough around the edges, and untrained in the military art, but he was viewed as a leader and, as a result, his tenure as a private was brief. Forrest was quickly granted a commission as a Lieutenant Colonel and authorized to recruit a battalion of mounted rangers. The prevailing sentiment regarding his leadership ability was expressed in a Memphis newspaper editorial which read in part, "Those who know Col. Forrest, who are acquainted with his reckless bravery controlled by a fund of sound and logical sense -- in short, those who know the man will not be surprised at the wishes of so many to be led by him."<sup>2</sup>

Upon the formation of his new command he embarked upon a brief, but intense military career which would earn him the fierce loyalty of his subordinates, the admiration and sometimes jealousy of his fellow officers, and the respect of his opponents as evidenced by their references to him as "The Wizard of the Saddle" and the "Devil Forrest." However, the relevance for current and future operational commanders is not to be found in the accolades of the past, but rather in the application to the present found in the study of Forrest's operational leadership in light of current warfighting doctrine.

### **Framework of the Case Study**

Military operational art and operational leadership are the subject of a myriad of published works and the focus of numerous ongoing research efforts. Within the United States a

distillation of this vast body of professional work is captured in the doctrine of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in such publications as the Doctrine of Joint Operations (Joint Pub 3-0), and also within the doctrine of each of the services in such publications as the Army's Field Manual on Operations (FM 100-5) and the Marine Corps' Fleet Marine Force Manual on Warfighting (FMFM-1). While terms and terminology may vary somewhat between the joint and service publications, a continued focus by all of the armed forces on joint professional military education and doctrine has served to narrow this gap.

Selected operational considerations critical in planning and conducting war are used as a basis for examining General Forrest's operational leadership. The list of key operational considerations to be examined is by no means exhaustive, but it does focus on certain aspects of the operational art which are of particular relevance to current and future operational commanders. Finally, the heaviest emphasis is placed on issues of leadership and the human element because if, "war is a clash between opposing human wills, the human dimension is central to war."<sup>3</sup> This concept is further reinforced by the observation that,

"The roles of the operational commander will not change no matter what technological advances will be introduced into the decision making process. Computers and the new informational technology can only aid, but not replace the human elements, and it is a dangerous misconception to think otherwise."<sup>4</sup>

### **Major Operational Considerations**

#### **Philosophy of Command, Commander's Intent and Concept of Operations**

General Forrest was not quick to go to war, but once he entered the fight he quickly developed a clear sense of mission and purpose, which he consistently inculcated in his forces

by the establishment of his philosophy of command and by the clear, concise communication of his intent and concept of operations. He clearly understood that, "it is essential that our philosophy of command support the way we fight."<sup>5</sup> General Forrest saw to it that the members of his command had a full appreciation of the larger picture of the war and his philosophy of waging war.

"War means fighting," Forrest once said, "and fighting means killing . . ." The same brutally simple idea undoubtedly occurred to many other leaders on both sides of the Civil War at one time or another, but few of them translated that concept into action as consistently, as ruthlessly, and as effectively as Nathan Bedford Forrest did in the brilliant series of campaigns he waged in the western area of operations. . ."<sup>6</sup>

Forrest was no fool; he knew that war was not to be taken lightly and should be avoided if at all possible, but once the decision was made to engage in conflict, he knew that war must be waged with a level of skill, unity of effort and ferocity which settles the issue as efficiently and effectively as possible. His philosophy of command was reinforced by his personal leadership style. He at all times commanded well forward and maintained an almost constant physical presence with his troops. While a modern operational commander could hardly expect to be measured by Forrest's record of having 29 horses shot from beneath him and having personally killed 30 enemy soldiers in close combat, the principle is what is important. He was constantly with his troops, he understood their situation, their needs and their desires. He shared their privations and when the enemy was engaged he was constantly assessing and reassessing the situation in order to find and exploit any weaknesses that the enemy might present.

Upon assuming command until the war's end, General Forrest diligently and consistently worked to ensure that his philosophy of command was imbued throughout his entire

organization. An early biography of Forrest clearly captured this idea when it noted that in sixty days, "... he had been able to impregnate them [his forces] with his ardent, indomitable spirit, and mould them into the most formidable instruments, in his hands, for his manner of making war."<sup>7</sup> It has also been observed that:

"In a way they are a team, an army and its leader, each incomplete without the other and each taking on part of the character from the other. An army becomes an extension of a great leader, reflecting his spirit and genius throughout its ranks. Few armies have reflected the character of their leader more than the command of Nathan Bedford Forrest."<sup>8</sup>

These words give compelling support for the effectiveness of Forrest's operational leadership in the establishment of his philosophy of command.

But to have a philosophy of command and a sense of purpose is a useless thing unless it can be communicated. General Forrest's lack of formal education deprived him of any knowledge of classical literature, but he would have clearly understood the wisdom of Pericles' admonition that, "A man who has the knowledge but lacks the power clearly to express it is no better off than if he never had any ideas at all."<sup>9</sup> Forrest was a man of many ideas and he knew how to communicate them.

Current Joint Doctrine stresses the need for the operational commander to be able to describe "... how the JFC visualizes the operation will unfold based on the selected COA ... ." in order for "... staff and subordinate commanders to understand what they are to do without further instructions."<sup>10</sup> General Forrest was a person of keen insight and great battlefield vision but he also had an ability to effectively communicate his vision to his subordinate commanders and troops so that they understood his intent. In advance of the



Battle of Brice's Crossroads, Forrest communicated his concept of operations to one of his Brigade Commanders as they approached the battlefield on horseback. His remarks are a model of clear, concise communications which provide the essence of his vision:

"I know they greatly outnumber the troops I have at hand, but the road along which they will march is narrow and muddy; they will make slow progress. The country is densely wooded and the undergrowth so heavy that when we strike them they will not know how few men we have. Their cavalry will move out ahead of the infantry and should reach the crossroads three hours in advance. We can whip their cavalry in that time. As soon as the fight opens they will send back to have the infantry hurried up. It is going to be hot as hell, and coming on a run for five or six miles, their infantry will be so tired out we will ride right over them. I want everything to move up as fast as possible. I will go ahead with Lyon and the escort will open the fight."<sup>11</sup>

His concept of operations proved to be completely valid and the forces under his command completed what "may well be regarded as the classic small-army action of the Civil War or of American history."<sup>12</sup>

General Forrest had a clear sense of mission and purpose which he consistently reinforced within his command by the establishment of his philosophy of command and by the clear, concise communication of his intent and concept of operations. The focus, clarity and consistency which Forrest displayed is an excellent example for current and future operational commanders, if forces under their control are going to be prepared to operate independently and interdependently in support of the overall objectives on the modern battlefield.

### Shaping the Battle

The lethality of modern weapons and explosion of information technology suggest that future conflicts will be increasingly deadly and that the pace of events will unfold with

increasing speed. Under such circumstances, it becomes critically important for an operational commander to create the conditions for success prior to engagement, because once the fighting has begun the ability to impact its progress may be extremely limited. The ability to shape the battle may indeed mean the difference between defeat and victory in future conflicts. In a hypothetical sense, it can be said that, "Ideally, when the moment of engagement arrives, the issue has already been resolved: through our orchestration of the events leading up to the encounter, we have so shaped the conditions of war that the result is a matter of course. We have shaped the action to our advantage."<sup>13</sup> B.H. Liddell Hart describes this as a "dislocation" of the enemy forces and considers it the "aim of strategy" because the "... true aim is not so much to seek battle as to seek a strategic situation so advantageous that if it does not of itself produce the decision, its continuation by a battle is sure to achieve this."<sup>14</sup>

Forrest was a master at shaping the battle. Whether on the offensive or defensive he possessed a tremendous ability to engage the enemy under circumstances which were favorable to his forces. The quotation previously cited regarding Forrest's concept of operations at Brice's Crossroads serves not only as an excellent example of effective communications, but also as an abject lesson in engaging the enemy on terms favorable to your forces. Both Forrest's forces and those of General Sturgis who opposed him at Brice's Crossroads had traveled many miles prior to the engagement, but it was Forrest who envisioned the nature of their battle and carefully selected the location and orchestrated the movements of his forces to ensure that the battle was to be fought on his terms. The key to victory according to Forrest was, "planning and making my own fight, never letting the other fellow make the fight for me."<sup>15</sup> Future operational commanders will need to be able to shape

the battle in terms favorable to their forces in order to increase the chances of success. The future may give precious little opportunity for second chances so that great care must be taken to create favorable conditions for engaging the enemy.

### Maneuver Warfare

Future operational commanders are likely to be faced with the challenge to "win quickly against a larger foe [at least quantitatively if not qualitatively] . . . with minimal casualties and limited external support."<sup>16</sup> Current military doctrine "for winning under these conditions is . . . based on rapid, flexible and opportunistic maneuver."<sup>17</sup> Therefore a key consideration for future operational commanders will be the ability to effectively execute maneuver warfare campaigns. Such a warfighting philosophy has as its objective, ". . . shattering the enemy morally and physically by paralyzing and confounding him, by avoiding his strength, by quickly and aggressively exploiting his vulnerabilities, and striking him in a way that will hurt him most."<sup>18</sup> Maneuver warfare then is seen as the key to "dislocating" enemy forces, engaging the enemy on favorable terms and then exploiting opportunities presented. Maneuver warfare has been described as a ". . . way of thinking in and about war that should shape our every action. It is a state of mind born of bold will, intellect, initiative and ruthless opportunism."<sup>19</sup> Based on the earlier discussion regarding Forrest's philosophy of command, maneuver warfare can be viewed as an inherent part of his operational activities. In virtually every engagement his forces were outnumbered two, three or four to one. Military necessity and minimal manning levels dictated economy of force considerations which required that he be extremely conscious of casualties and for most of the war he operated in a detached mode

which meant he was virtually alone and unsupported. Precious few supplies were available from Richmond and those that did arrive tended to be ill suited for his operations. Forrest was truly engaged in what would be called today a "come as you are war" and his campaigns and battles serve as an excellent example of the synergistic effects of dislocation, attack and exploitation created by the effective prosecution of maneuver warfare. His effectiveness in applying the concept of maneuver warfare was attested to by the comments of one of his chief protagonists. General Sherman, whose forces were for most of the war the chief object of Forrest's campaigns, remarked that, "After all, I think Forrest was the most remarkable man our Civil War produced on either side . . . he had a genius for strategy which was original, and to me incomprehensible. There was no theory or art of war by which I could calculate with any degree of certainty what Forrest was up to. He seemed always to know what I was doing or intended to do, while I am free to confess I could never tell or form any satisfactory idea of what he was trying to accomplish."<sup>20</sup> Having succeeded in dislocating his adversary, when the time was appropriate his forces, reflecting the will and spirit of their commander, were always ferocious on the attack and relentless in the pursuit. General Sturgis, who suffered defeat at the hands of Forrest's forces at Brice's Crossroads, remarked in utter exasperation to one of his staff officers as his forces fled the battle in complete disarray, "For God's sake, if Mr. Forrest will let me alone I will let him alone."<sup>21</sup> However, Forrest had no intention of letting Sturgis alone and he pursued him relentlessly for more than 50 miles and completely shattered the remnants of the opposing force. The fleeing Union forces covered the same distance in thirty-six hours in retreat that they had covered in nine days on the advance. During the pursuit of Sturgis, Forrest expounded his philosophy for dislocation and

exploitation in his homespun manner by remarking to his Chief of Artillery, Captain John Morton, that the key was to, "Get 'em skeered [scared] and then keep the skeer on 'em."<sup>22</sup> Under such circumstances he could then afford to tell his vastly outnumbered troops that, "In a rout like this two men are equal to a 100. They will not stop to fight."<sup>23</sup> While this is obviously an exaggeration, the concept expressed in his aphorism is sound and future operational commanders will do well to heed the example set by General Forrest in the effective prosecution of his campaigns based on maneuver warfare.

The central importance of maneuver as a key to victory is reinforced in current joint doctrine which states that:

"The focus of both land and naval maneuver is to render the opponents incapable of resisting by shattering their morale and physical cohesion (their ability to fight as an effective, coordinate whole) rather than to destroy them physically through attrition."<sup>24</sup>

The ability to effectively conceive, implement, conduct and sustain joint and combined maneuver warfare operations will be a key consideration for future operational commanders. The operational impact of the concept of maneuver warfare when well executed under the leadership of an effective operational commander is exemplified time and again in Forrest's campaigns. He constantly had his adversaries off-balance and frequently succeeded in accomplishing his objective without active engagement, but when he did engage the enemy he did it with frightening ferocity and rapidly exploited any weaknesses which were presented. Such actions continue to serve as excellent examples for future operational commanders in the effective prosecution of maneuver warfare.

## Leadership

Leadership is in many ways the key operational consideration. It is the manifestation of the human element in the operational art and the ultimate integration of all other operational considerations. The selection of operational commanders and subordinate leaders is of paramount importance because it is leadership which animates and gives life to campaign plans and strategies, and creates an environment conducive to success. Leadership is a complex subject which is much akin to a judge's oft-repeated comments about pornography in that it is difficult to describe, but you know it when you see it. In an attempt to address this complex subject, Captain Robert Rubel has described operational level leadership as a process containing two parts: vision and influence. Vision comprises two functions: recognition of the kind of fight you are in and seeing the road to victory.<sup>25</sup>

Forrest, maybe more so than any other Confederate commander, had an appreciation for the kind of fight that he was in. He fully comprehended the numerical, logistical and industrial superiority of the union forces. He knew that the south could ill afford to engage in continued pitched battles. He consistently advocated a strategy of delay and disruption aimed at weakening the Union forces over time in order to even the odds or make the war too costly for the Union to pursue. He knew that the military situation dictated an absolute economy of force and that the confederacy could trade space for time while bleeding the Union dry if they could preserve their own forces. Not only did he know what type of fight he was in, he felt he knew how to win it as well. For him the road to victory was in selective engagements of the enemy based on maneuver, dislocation and exploitation. He was reckless when the situation provided but he would avoid battle if conditions were not in his favor. He had little use for

the sort of force on force battles which cost so many precious lives and gained little, because when opportunities for the offensive were presented they were not exploited. These were realities not fully appreciated by many of his superiors until it was too late. In the case of Jefferson Davis, much too late! At the funeral of General Forrest, Governor James D. Porter of Tennessee rode in the same carriage with the ex-President of the Southern Confederacy and in a letter to one of Forrest's biographers, Governor Porter stated:

"As we were driving to the cemetery, Mr. Davis spoke in the highest terms of Forrest's ability as a soldier. I remarked: 'History has accorded to General Forrest the first place as a cavalry leader in the war between the States, and has named him as one of the half-dozen great soldiers of the country.' Mr. Davis replied with great earnestness: 'I agree with you. The trouble was that the generals commanding in the Southwest never appreciated Forrest until it was too late. Their judgement was that he was a bold and enterprising partisan raider and rider. I was misled by them, and I never knew how to measure him until I read his reports of his campaign across the Tennessee River in 1864 [to disrupt Sherman's LOCs]. This induced a study of his earlier reports, after that I was prepared to adopt what you are pleased to name as the judgement of history.' In reply I said: 'I cannot comprehend such lack of appreciation after he fought the battle at Brice's Crossroads in June of 1864. That battle was not a cavalry raid nor an accident. It was the conception of a man endowed with a genius for war.' Mr. Davis replied to this: 'That campaign was not understood at Richmond. The impression made upon those in authority was that Forrest had made another successful raid, but I saw it all after it was too late'."26

Too late, indeed, to be of any benefit to the Confederacy, but as Davis' remarks attest, Forrest did have a sense of vision and purpose based on a knowledge of the type of fight he was in, and he could see a path to victory. If others had shared his vision, the results of the war might have been very different, if not in outcome at least in detail.

The influence side of Captain Rubel's operational leadership model also comprises two parts: dealing constructively with uncertainty and gaining influence over subordinate commanders. There can be little doubt that Forrest dealt constructively with uncertainty. In

1892 General Viscount Wolseley, distinguished retired commander of Britain's armies, wrote of Forrest that, "His mind was not narrowed by military apothegms learnt by rote, . . . his acute judgement and power of perception" were usually able to "find out the enemy's weak point, and having ascertained it, he forthwith went for it . . ."<sup>27</sup> Even in the thick of the fighting he had an ability to calmly analyze the circumstances and develop an effective course of action. A recount is given of Forrest's reaction when presented orders for a new mission, which he responded to by asking a long series of questions concerning logistics, lines of operation, handling of prisoners, etc. But, "having isolated the chances of success from the causes of failure with the care of a chemist experimenting in his laboratory," his "whole manner . . . changed . . . and he informed the senior officer that we would march with the dawn."<sup>28</sup> Clearly he was a leader who had the ability to sort the wheat from the chaff, think creatively and address the unique aspects of each problem. Forrest was also a master of influencing his subordinates. At times he did it by sheer force of will and brute strength but for the most part he influenced his subordinates much more indirectly, but always very effectively. "He engendered throughout every body of troops that he commanded, for any length of time, a kind of family unity . . ."<sup>29</sup> As a means of extending his influence he also took it upon himself, when appropriate, to explain his plans in detail to the lowest level of troops so that each member of the command was capable of independent action during the course of the battle.

However, despite his demonstrated record of success, Forrest was no more perfect than the next man. His temper was legendary and he was at times quick to judge people and issues without a complete understanding of the facts. Additionally, while his confidence was in no



small measure a key to his success, he was supremely confident in his own abilities and ideas. Such confidence gave rise on several occasions to disagreements with superior officers regarding his orders and directions which could only be characterized as insubordination. He clearly had a sense of vision but he was frequently frustrated by either his superior's inability to grasp his vision or by his inability to influence them so that they might gain a greater appreciation for his perspective. As was discussed, he had demonstrated the ability to influence his subordinates, but an equally essential aspect of leadership at the operational level is the ability to effectively interact with the chain of command and influence the outcome of the strategic planning process. This shortcoming on Forrest's part proved to be a severe liability and a reminder that lessons are to be learned from success as well as failure.

Although unschooled in the military operational art, Forrest was above all a leader and his tenure as an operational commander gave ample evidence of his leadership abilities. His operational leadership was both visionary and pragmatic. And while he was never provided the opportunity to rise to the highest levels of command, his ability to do so was recognized at least by some. Following the completion of his skillful leadership of a rear guard action which allowed General Hood's entire army to escape certain destruction after the ill-fated attack on Nashville, one of Forrest's staff officers remarked that, "The part which he [Forrest] took in the Hood retreat from Nashville, in directing almost every movement of the army, suggesting the roads that should be taken, the manner in which the artillery and baggage-trains were to be moved, sending messengers every few hours to General Hood, giving the minutest practical details, showed him fully capable of handling an army of any size."<sup>30</sup> As Clausewitz said, "There are Commanders-in-Chief who could not have led a cavalry regiment with distinction;

and cavalry commanders who could not have led armies.”<sup>31</sup> Nathan Bedford Forrest was one of those individuals who was capable doing both with distinction.

As Professor Vego has remarked that, “Operational leadership, in particular, is a more elusive concept and even more difficult to explain.”<sup>32</sup> However, future operational commanders would be well served by a close examination of the leadership of General Forrest. His military career is a testament to the fact that a leader with the intellectual capabilities to provide their command with a strong sense of mission, vision and purpose and a sound concept of operations, coupled with the character and stamina to face uncertainty and the ability to influence those around them will accomplish a great deal over the course of their careers.

### Conclusion

Operational Command and the practice of the military operational art does not lend itself to checklists or cookbook solutions. Command at the operational level is too large, too dynamic and too complex to subject itself to such generalities and oversimplifications. However, the prospective operational commander can do much to prepare for the assumption of command. There is no substitute for experience and aspiring operational commanders would be well served to seek command at all levels in order to develop their leadership skills. Additionally, the examination and study of past operational leaders, both successes and failures, provide valuable insight into the requirements and demands of leadership at the operational level. Nathan Bedford Forrest is an operational commander whose career

provides a legacy of successful leadership at the operational level. He was no saint and his personal biases and prejudices are wholly unacceptable by today's standards, but he was an extremely effective military commander who by many accounts bordered on the genius. But, as one writer commented regarding Forrest's apparent genius for the military art, "One can study that quality, comment on it, admire and even compare it with the same in others but not understand and explain it."<sup>33</sup> This type of "genius" is indeed hard to understand and explain but future operational commanders will continue to benefit from rigorous inquiry into the careers of past operational commanders for the derivation of lessons which can be applied to the future. General Forrest, for all of his human frailties, is such a person and his military career will continue to serve as a rich case study of effective operational leadership.

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